



We've got a prime opportunity to advance the Gateway Cities Vision

In 2013, Gateway City leaders came together to develop an “education vision.” Their farsighted plan leverages unique urban assets to create exceptional learning environments. Achieving this vision is fundamental to making Gateway Cities more attractive communities for families to live and more productive places for employers to locate. *In today's economy, nothing is more central to the economic revitalization of these cities and their regions than realizing this education vision.*

That is why Gateway City leaders must be attuned to the ongoing discussion about changing Massachusetts's approach to education accountability. To comply with federal law under the new Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), Massachusetts will overhaul its education accountability policies in early 2017.

The decisions state education officials make over the next few months are critically important in two respects:

First, by ranking schools according to performance as required by the federal law, state accountability policies tell the

public where they can find a good education. If the new formula the state designs to sort schools is not sensitive to the complexity of inclusive urban districts, Gateway Cities will have great difficulty attracting both families with young children and talented educators to their communities.

Second, by holding schools responsible for demonstrating results, the design of state accountability policy sends strong signals about what to prioritize. Gateway Cities will have great difficulty marshalling resources to achieve the components of their shared vision if accountability policies are not aligned.

We spent the better part of 2016 talking with Gateway City educators about how they can tap into the unique opening ESSA presents to advance their shared vision. What follows is a summary, a mix between talking-points and a playbook of sorts. We hope it proves useful to a broad cross-section of Gateway City leaders, and inspires them to speak out as these issues move to the forefront for state education policymakers.

Get to know the Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning.

To consider the opportunity that ESSA provides, Gateway City leaders need working knowledge of the vision. Here's a quick rundown:

The Vision is built on faith in Gateway City educational assets. These assets are just as real as urban infrastructure and historic architecture, and potentially far more valuable. Gateway Cities have a leg up with high-quality early-education providers that working families would find desirable, were they more visible. The cultural diversity of Gateway Cities allows students to appreciate different perspectives—important preparation for college and today's global workplace. Partnerships with regional employers and vocational schools offer mentoring, career exploration, and unique internship opportunities for high-school students. There are also opportunities to earn free college credit and take a wider array of courses through the public colleges located in nearly every Gateway City.

The vision emphasizes dynamic and community-wide approaches. Gateway Cities will fail if they can't build public education systems that respond more nimbly to the changing needs of employers in an economy that is shifting more rapidly than ever. This dynamism must be reflected in the design of the state's next-generation accountability system. It's also abundantly clear that K-12 school systems, on their own, cannot provide Gateway City students with the opportunities and supports they need to succeed; rising to this challenge requires a "community-wide" response.

Four components are at the core of the vision.

- >> **EARLY EDUCATION:** Birth-to-grade-three learning systems that ensure all children in these diverse communities are able to acquire the early literacy skills they will need to succeed.
- >> **SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SUPPORTS:** Fostering social and emotional growth by weaving together in-school and out-of-school programs, responding to the individual strengths and needs of all students, and helping students from diverse backgrounds interact positively.
- >> **PATHWAYS TO COLLEGE & CAREER:** Leveraging strong partnerships with Career/Vocational Technical Education schools, local colleges, universities, and regional employers to propel students toward success in a rapidly-changing economy.
- >> **WELCOMING NEWCOMERS:** Designing learning systems to offer launching pads for newcomers landing in these communities, so that immigrants continue to contribute powerfully to the social and economic vitality of Gateway Cities and their regions.

While Massachusetts has yet to make significant investments to further Gateway City efforts to realize these components of the vision, these policy areas have received increasing attention from state leaders over the past four years. Social-emotional supports have gained particular traction, as have efforts to establish early college pathways, and incorporate newcomers through innovative parent-engagement models and dual-language immersion schools.

"As Gateway Educators, we recognize the adversity many students face in their lives and acknowledge the impact that these challenges have on their abilities to focus on learning. But we still hold the highest expectations for our students. They are fully capable of success in all realms. We must reach beyond academic interventions and offer social, emotional, and behavioral supports. Collaborative community partnerships are critical to effectively providing these services."

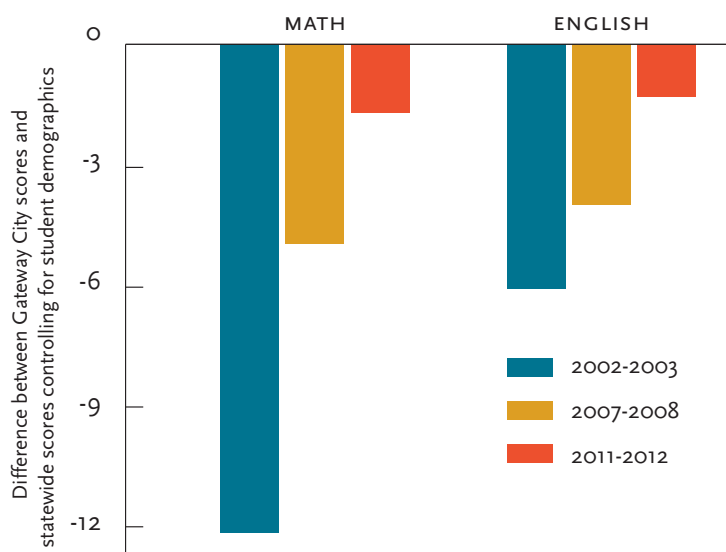
GIANNA ALLENTUCK, ADJUSTMENT COUNSELOR, ELIAS BROOKINGS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, SPRINGFIELD

Education accountability has done a lot of good for Gateway Cities...

Although many aspects of education have been controversial, it's worth noting what accountability has accomplished for Gateway Cities over the past two decades. In 1993, Massachusetts adopted rigorous standards, and MCAS assessments in Math, English, and Science to gauge how well instruction in public schools was helping students meet these standards. The state also provided additional funding to low-wealth communities.

This model produced substantial academic gains. Twenty years ago, low-income students in Massachusetts scored in the middle of the pack; today low-income students from Massachusetts have the highest scores in the nation.

Gateway Cities have significantly narrowed the performance gap



Source: Analysis of DESE student-level data MCAS files performed by Cape Ann Economics

How to read this chart: We compared the MCAS score of each Gateway City student to the statewide average for students with the same demographic make-up (race/ethnicity, family income, English-language ability). The bars show how Gateway City students on average test relative to their demographic-peers (a negative differential suggests Gateway City students score lower). A 20-point range falls between each level on the test (i.e., needs improvement, proficient, advanced). These data attest to the large performance gaps that Gateway City educators nearly eliminated over the last decade.

The focus on improving Gateway City schools over the past two decades has changed the way teaching and learning occurs in these communities. Teachers work collaboratively to improve instruction, carefully reviewing data on how each individual student is learning and tailoring their efforts to help each student reach proficiency. This has made a tremendous difference. Adjusting for demographic differences, Gateway City students now perform about equal to their peers in other Massachusetts schools, which hadn't been the case previously (see figure below). We have also seen dramatic increases in Gateway City high-school graduation rates.

Anecdotally, Gateway City schools are often noted for striving to implement innovative models. Their teachers are highly sought after by other districts because Gateway City educators have extensive experience with individualized assessment and instruction.

“Gateway City schools have worked as hard as any school system out there to improve instruction and position students for success. Some of that effort shines through in the data, but so much of it is not reflected in the numbers. And that stings.”

ANDRE RAVENELLE, SUPERINTENDENT,
FITCHBURG PUBLIC SCHOOLS

but there is much room for improvement.

Education accountability is quintessentially a policy experiment on an enormous scale. Today we know a lot about what has worked and what hasn't. Gateway City leaders need to be aware of on these takeaways, especially the urban concerns.

We narrowed the curriculum to tested subjects. The focus on improving standardized test scores took time and resources away from non-tested subjects (like art and history). Urban districts struggling to increase test scores faced particularly heavy pressure to allocate limited resources to math and English. Even after-school partners in these communities were asked to change their curriculum, focusing less attention on healthy youth-development and more on tested academic subjects. This short-sighted tendency has had real implications for disadvantaged urban youth, who often need non-academic outlets and caring adult relationships to help them cope and respond positively to stressors in their lives.

We set a ceiling on achievement, not a floor. Because testing ends at 10th grade, the expectation set by the system is that students should be able to learn all that they need to know half-way through high school. The vast majority of students are now meeting this relatively low standard, but accountability currently does little to encourage schools to help students *surpass* this test. This gives parents the impression that their children are well-prepared for the challenges beyond high school when in reality they may lack the skills for post-secondary success.

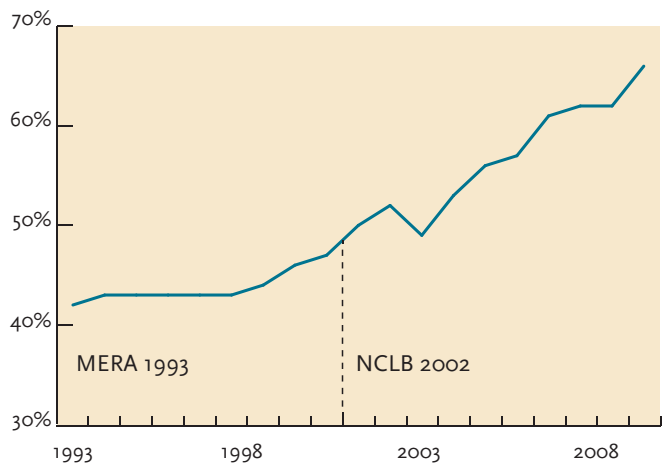
And our accountability system has had great difficulty measuring the performance of inclusive urban schools, which has a number of adverse consequences. Gateway City schools serve large numbers of English Language Learners and children with learning disabilities. They also educate thousands of students who are unstably housed, or moving between foster families, or fleeing crisis in their country of origin. These students will invariably face more difficulty on standardized tests, but our system has not been good at controlling for these factors so that apples-to-apples comparisons can be made when ranking schools statewide. As a result, our measures are heavily indic-

ative of out-of-school factors, and tend to obscure—rather than distill—each school's contribution to student learning.

Not appropriately recognizing the performance of urban public schools makes it more challenging for Gateway Cities to find skilled instructors. Research indicates accountability can exacerbate the difficulty high-poverty schools have retaining talented teachers. This is particularly problematic for Gateway Cities. Unlike Boston, these communities lack resources and amenities to attract and retain talented educators.

Current communications by public education agencies and the media focusing attention on standardized test performance is also problematic, because it weakens fragile real-estate markets. Reported test scores influence home values in the community, especially when schools receive a “failing” label. This has significant fiscal consequences: Gateway Cities depend heavily on residential property to generate revenue, especially in comparison to major cities, which can draw on large commercial tax bases. While many factors are at play, the concentration of poverty in Gateway Cities has accelerated dramatically, as more and more attention has been paid to standardized test scores.

Share of students who are low-income in Massachusetts Gateway Cities



Source: MA Department of Elementary & Secondary Education

This is the moment. With Gateway City leadership, Massachusetts can make another leap forward.

The shortcomings of first-generation accountability policies are not unique to Massachusetts. The knowledge we have gained as states across the country experienced these same challenges makes them eminently fixable.

Taking stock of this unique moment to further the Gateway Cities Vision for Dynamic Community-Wide Learning, it's apparent that we must not just mend, but actually build. Unlocking the promise of new and improved next-generation accountability requires us to develop and try new approaches.

With a very short timeframe to develop new policies, the accountability system Massachusetts initially implements under ESSA will likely look quite similar to the old, yet the new federal law gives the state considerable freedom to adapt and continuously improve. Gateway City leaders must urge the state to build iterative change into the design of the new system.

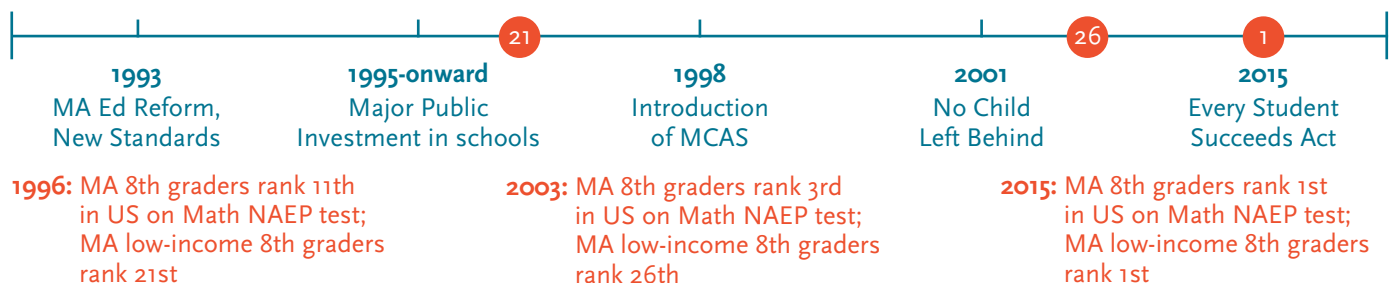
This subtle point traces back to the Gateway Cities Vision, which Gateway City leaders were partially inspired to draw up because they felt their voices hadn't been heard in past policy-development conversation. Gateway City educators are keen to engage in accountability policy decisions. Integrating them with efforts to continuously innovate in this area will dramatically increase ownership of these data. Insights from improvement science research tell us that this buy-in is central to building the data-friendly "learning culture" that is the hallmark of effective organizations.

Over the next few months, Massachusetts must accomplish three things:

- >> Accurately capture the performance of inclusive urban public schools.
- >> Spur the development of local accountability initiatives.
- >> Build mechanisms directly into the system to continuously improve.

"Kids with intellectual gifts need to be pushed to learn more every day. And they should be recognized when they do well in school, just like athletes get attention for winning games. I want my community to challenge me and appreciate my accomplishments as a scholar."

KEVIN ZENO, SENIOR,
BURNCOAT HIGH SCHOOL, WORCESTER



1 Accurately capture the performance of inclusive urban public schools.

Despite costly expenditures to collect school performance data, the public uniformly says they aren't getting the information they need. This is particularly true for Gateway City residents. Massachusetts can get much better at disseminating data in a manner that simplifies without distorting.

The biggest issue is that the school report cards we produce now place a premium on ranking schools. There are very legitimate questions about rank-ordering schools, but if we must do so under federal law, we can devise a system so that urban schools are not disadvantaged for being inclusive, and all stakeholders get the information they need.

First off, separate student performance from school performance, so that educators, parents and communities can understand both how students are achieving, and how each school is contributing to the education of its students. We can't continue to conflate the two when they are very different and very critical pieces of information.

To be clear, student performance is most important. We absolutely need an unvarnished picture of how students are doing individually and in groups. But these student outcomes are heavily influenced by out-of-school factors that schools have limited ability to control. Trying to hold schools *solely* accountable for these outcomes absolves us from working equally hard to improve other systems that heavily influence child wellbeing and learning, such as early education, public safety, health

care, and housing. Understanding student outcomes is critical to facilitating conversations about how we invest comprehensively in services like these across our communities.

We also need to know about school performance—how much each school contributes to a student's development relative to other schools. Any indicator we use to measure the performance of a school in a formal accountability system should be statistically controlled to the best of our ability, so that we're comparing apples-to-apples and are distilling the actual contribution made by educators.

Now this won't be possible with every piece of information we want the public to have about schools. So in addition to the formula required under federal law to identify school performance and classify schools into categories, the state should also make available information documenting student access to and participation in learning opportunities such as enrichment offerings, advanced coursework, vocational training, and career-development activities, among many others.

Initially these data may not make Gateway City schools appear strong, but they *will*: draw attention to opportunity gaps; highlight and affirm to students, families, and educators that such programming is valued; and create incentives for educators, schools, and districts to seek tools and resources to increase access to and participation in such opportunities over time.

2 Spur the development of local accountability initiatives.

Going back to the Gateway Cities Vision, we need accountability approaches that support community-wide initiatives. Disadvantaged Gateway City students are going to require far more seamless support if they are to vault the increasingly high bar the Bay State's economic realities have set for them.

This is beyond the preview of ESSA accountability designed by DESE, but Massachusetts has a secretary of education to encourage coordination across the early education, K-12, and higher education continuum. The secretariat needs to take the lead incentivizing the development of strong local accountability systems that can foster this kind of integration in Gateway Cities.

Examples are already cropping up in Gateway Cities. The Worcester Education Collaborative is currently working with partners to develop a district strategic plan, as is Project Learn in Lowell. Across the country, cities have pursued "collaborative impact" models to align resources around common goals.

Encouraged by the promise of this approach, philanthropic partners have been eager to support communities in their planning processes. Massachusetts can help Gateway Cities draw these private resources, spur the development of local accountability initiatives, and give them added credibility by creating strong incentives through grant programs.

For example, early-college and dual-enrollment funding could be prioritized for communities that include a goal for increasing post-secondary completion rates in their local accountability system. Similarly, early-learning grants could go to cities that make kindergarten readiness a local accountability measure. And communities that establish data-driven approaches to deliver wraparound services could get preferential treatment for public-health grants.

3 Build mechanisms directly into the system to continuously improve.

If numbers one and two are forward hops, number three is the great leap upward that can propel Gateway Cities toward achieving their shared vision for educational excellence. ESSA expressly calls for bold progress, encouraging up to seven states to test radical changes and others to follow after this initial group tests the waters. Massachusetts should similarly build opportunity for innovation directly into the state accountability policy.

This may not be so easy. Both DESE and districts lack capacity to take on more. But sitting still now would be a mistake. Massachusetts is first-in-the-nation today because two decades ago we got out ahead on accountability. We now run the risk of sacrificing our lead, by leaving the most pressing innovation to other states. And Gateway Cities would pay a dear price, because the benefits of finding new approaches hold particular promise for inclusive urban districts.

As we discuss ESSA implementation plans for the 2017 school year, Gateway City leaders should push the state to commit now to developing the accountability system further along three fronts:

Creating new assessments that can track and support the acquisition of a variety of skills. Standardized tests like the MCAS indicate how well students are gaining academic knowledge, but they aren't great at telling us whether students have learned to design and conduct research, solve complex problems working collaboratively, or communicate in a variety of ways. These critical-thinking and communication skills are essential to success in today's economy. Schools need to develop performance tasks, portfolios, and extended learning tasks in order to measure whether students are gaining these skills. These assessments must be able to scale statewide, maintaining comparability across schools. This will be no easy feat, but the potential payoff is big. These assessments will be embed-

ded into instruction, so students spend less time test-taking and educators will have actionable information they can use to individualize instruction. Teachers will also be much better positioned to detect the strengths of different types of learners, including students with learning disabilities. This is particularly important for inclusive schools that serve many types of students. Urban educators see real promise in innovative assessments that help them support each individual's unique developmental pathway.

Measuring school climate and putting the data to productive use. Creating inclusive urban schools and engaging parents from diverse cultures is front and center in the Gateway Cities vision. School-climate surveys will provide valuable insight into how comfortable and supported different types of students feel in their learning environments. While these surveys have been tested in a variety of contexts and research shows they can provide valid and reliable comparisons, they haven't been made part of an accountability system. The promise is that measuring school climate would recognize Gateway City efforts to devote significant resources to engage parents and build cultural competency among the school community.

Supporting student-centered learning through competency-based progression. Another central tenet of the Gateway Cities vision is pathways to college and career. With limited resources and students with diverse needs, it is critical that students be positioned to tailor and navigate their pathways, progressing at their own pace. An assessment system designed to support competency-based progression offers an important step forward in this regard. Students should be able to demonstrate that they have mastered the standards so they can move on whenever they're ready.

Gateway City leaders are already modeling ground-up innovation

With both state and philanthropic support, a number of Gateway City districts (Attleboro, Lowell, and Revere) are at the forefront of practitioner-driven efforts to improve assessment and accountability through the recently-launched Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA). MCIEA is creating more robust ways to assess and improve student engagement, student achievement, and school quality. Started by educators who saw opportunities to do better, the curriculum-embedded, standards-based, performance assessments will capture mastery of content and skill development that evade today's standardized tests. This new initiative embodies the kind of collaborative approach Massachusetts should use to continuously improve accountability policy.

ESSA Accountability Checklist for Gateway City leaders:

- ✓ Insist on a formal accountability system that creates a level playing field for urban districts when describing performance by isolating each school's contribution to student learning.
- ✓ Advocate for school report cards that present data to residents in terms that they can understand, and expose opportunity gaps in critical learning experiences across schools.
- ✓ Enlist the state's support in developing local accountability systems that provide a strong framework for setting community priorities, especially those that cross system boundaries. Working together, the Baker Administration and legislative leaders can set this approach in motion in the FY 2018 budget.
- ✓ Ask DESE to clearly articulate how it will partner with Gateway City educators and stakeholders to continue innovating, especially in areas with critical implications for urban districts, such as next-generation assessment, school-climate surveys, and competency-based progression.
- ✓ Engage your teacher-leaders in the development of accountability policy, from piloting innovative assessments in their classrooms, and helping them partner with researchers to demonstrate the validity of new approaches, to creating outlets for teachers to dialogue with state policymakers. As inclusive urban communities, Gateway Cities need to make extra effort to place their educators at the forefront of this field.

Moving in this direction enjoys widespread public support!

MassINC conducted a public opinion poll of over 1,000 voters statewide in November 2016. Visit massinc.org for full results from the survey. The good news is that voters agree that it is time to take the next leap forward with education accountability. It makes good sense. Many of the next-generation concepts described herein would benefit all school districts, urban or not.



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